NASA, on test flight: 'There's your new spacecraft, America!'

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CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. | NASA's new Orion spacecraft made a "bull's-eye" Pacific splashdown Friday following a dramatic journey 3,604 miles beyond Earth. The achievement opens a new era of human exploration aimed at putting people on Mars.

The unmanned, 4½-hour test flight set at least one record: flying farther and faster than any capsule built for humans since the Apollo moon program.

"There's your new spacecraft, America," Mission Control commentator Rob Navias said as the Orion capsule neared the water 270 miles off Mexico's Baja peninsula.

NASA is counting on future Orions to carry astronauts beyond Earth's orbit in the decades ahead, to asteroids and ultimately the grand prize: Mars.

The lead flight director, Mike Sarafin, was emotional as he signed off from Houston.

"We challenged our best and brightest to continue to lead in space," Sarafin said. "While this was an unmanned mission, we were all on board Orion."

The agency quickly reported positive results: Not only did the capsule arrive intact, all the parachutes deployed and onboard computers withstood the intense radiation of the Van Allen belts surrounding Earth.

The capsule reached a peak altitude more than 14 times farther from our planet than the International Space Station. No spacecraft designed for astronauts had gone so far since Apollo 17 — NASA's final moon shot — 42 years ago.

NASA needed to send Orion that high in order to set the crew module up for a 20,000-mph, 4,000-degree entry. That was considered the most critical part of the entire flight — testing the largest of its kind heat shield for survival before humans climb aboard.

In 11 minutes, Orion slowed from 20,000 mph to 20 mph at splashdown, its final descent aided by eight parachutes deployed in sequence. A crew on board would have endured as much as 8.2 Gs, or 8.2 times the force of Earth gravity, double the Gs of a returning Russian Soyuz capsule, according to NASA.

Earth shrank from view through Orion's capsule window during its trip out to space, and stunning images were relayed back home. Its return was recorded by an unmanned drone flying over the recovery zone, providing more spectacular views. Helicopters then relayed images of the crew module bobbing in the water. Three of the five air bags deployed properly, enough to keep the capsule floating upright.

The U.S. Navy pulled up in a pair of ships to recover the spacecraft and transport it to San Diego, 630 miles away. Orion ended up just 1½ miles from the predicted splashdown spot. Only two of the parachutes could be recovered.

Once ashore, Orion will be transported by truck back to Cape Canaveral, just in time for Christmas.

It's supposed to soar again in 2017 in a launch abort test, followed by a second Orion heading to space in 2018 aboard the megarocket under development by NASA. Officials expect it will be at least seven years from now — 2021 — before Orion carries people, given present budget constraints.

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